President Reagan Courted Cropsey School Teacher

By: Dale C. Maley
For: Fairbury Blade newspaper
Date: December 14, 2020

In the early 1930s, about 100 people were attending Cropsey High School. None of these students realized their English teacher's boyfriend who visited her class would someday become the President of the United States.

Future Cropsey school teacher Margaret Cleaver was born in 1911 to the Reverend Benjamin Hill Cleaver and Mabel Lewis. Margaret had two sisters, Elizabeth and Helen Cleaver. As is the case with most ministers, the family moved every few years to a new city. When Margaret Cleaver reached high school age, her family was living in Dixon, Illinois.

Ronald Wilson Reagan was born in 1911 in Tampico, Illinois. He was the son of Jack Reagan and Nelle Clyde Wilson. The Reagan family also moved to several different towns during Ronald Reagan's childhood. When Ronald Reagan reached high school age, his family was living in Dixon, Illinois.

In the Fall of 1924, both Margaret Cleaver and Ronald Reagan started attending Dixon High School. Reagan developed interests in acting, sports, and storytelling. During the summer months, Reagan worked as a lifeguard at the Rock River in Lowell Park. During his time as a lifeguard, Reagan performed 77 rescues.

Margaret Cleaver was considered one of the Dixon High School's most intelligent students. Reagan became smitten with Margaret during their sophomore year at Dixon High School. Reagan had to battle the high school quarterback to win Margaret's attention. Reagan and Margaret were both in the Drama Club and appeared in several plays together. Reagan was elected the high school student body president, and Margaret was elected President of their senior class.

After finishing high school, Margaret decided to follow her two older sisters to attend Eureka College, 100 miles south of Dixon. Once Margaret chose Eureka College, Ronald Reagan immediately decided to follow his girlfriend and also attend Eureka College.

In the Fall of 1928, both Reagan and Margaret started attending Eureka College. Both of them joined the Eureka Drama Club and appeared in many college plays together. He became a member of the Tau Kappa Epsilon fraternity. Reagan was an indifferent college student. He majored in economics and sociology and graduated with a C grade.

Reagan developed a reputation as a "jack of all trades," excelling in campus politics, sports, and theater. He was a member of the football team and captain of the swim team. Reagan was elected student body president and participated in student protests against the college president.

By their sophomore year at Eureka, Reagan gave his fraternity pin to Margaret. Soon after, he gave her an engagement ring. Even though Reagan did not have much money, he splurged and bought 5 pounds of chocolate for Margaret's sorority sisters to celebrate their engagement. Margaret and Reagan agreed to get married as soon as they could afford it.

By the time Reagan and Margaret graduated from Eureka College in the Spring of 1932, the Great Depression was in full swing. Many Eureka professors got no pay for several years. Because of the hard times, the Eureka College Class of 1932 had no college yearbook.

After graduation, Margaret and Reagan did not have enough money to get married. Reagan took several different sports radio announcing jobs in Iowa. He moved to the WHO radio in Des Moines as an announcer for Chicago Cubs baseball games.

Margaret Cleaver accepted a teaching position at the Cropsey High School. She started teaching English in the Fall of 1932. Some of her fellow teachers included John Land, Margaret Meeker, Ruth Starr, and Charles Taylor. Margaret was the Sophomore Class Advisor in 1932. The officers of that class were President Loraine Weatherford, Vice-President Betty Jean Meeker, and Secretary-Treasurer was Marjorie Woods.

Margaret liked to go to the farm of student Josephine Brucker and ride their horses. Josephine later married Wendell Cooperider. Maurice Cox graduated from Cropsey high school in 1936 and was a student while Margaret was teaching. Maurice was later the Fairbury Chief of Police and Mayor.

One day, Ronald Reagan motored to the Cropsey High School to visit his fiancée Margaret Cleaver. Lawrence Brucker was a student in Margaret's class. After Ronald Reagan became famous, Mr. Brucker often recounted the story about meeting the future President when his teacher brought the man she was dating to their class.

In the summer of 1934, 23-year-old Margaret and her older sister Helen decided to visit Europe. While in France, Margaret met a handsome young man named James Waddell Gordon Jr. from Virginia. Mr. Gordon was the same age as Margaret and was stationed in Europe as a U.S. Government foreign service officer. Mr. Gordon and Margaret began a romantic relationship.

Margaret returned to her Cropsey teaching job after her European trip. She then called off her engagement to Reagan. Margaret mailed Reagan's fraternity pin and engagement ring to him in Des Moines. Margaret included a letter which explained she had gone to Europe with her sister and met and fell in love with foreign service officer James Gordon. Later in life, Margaret recounted that Reagan was absorbed with Hollywood and the movies. Margaret stated that she had no interest in moving out West, and she did not want to raise her family in Hollywood.

Margaret finished the 1934-1935 school year teaching in Cropsey. In June of 1935, she married Mr. Gordon in Eureka, Illinois. Her father officiated at her wedding. Cropsey citizens who attended the wedding were Mrs. Goldie Meeker, Miss Margaret Meeker, Mr. and Mrs. Willis War, Mr. and Mrs. John Land, Mr. and Mrs. Adam Metzger, and Mrs. Charles Cumpston.

Margaret and James Gordon eventually settled in Richmond, Virginia. They had five children and 11 grandchildren. Margaret Gordon passed away in 2001. Ronald Reagan became a movie actor, the Governor of California, and then the United States President. Reagan died in 2004.

In 2002, the Cropsey High School building where Margaret taught was torn down. For about 100 Cropsey High School students, they had the unique opportunity of attending school with the fiancée of Ronald Reagan. The students in Margaret's class got the unique opportunity to meet the future President of the United States.

Margaret Cleaver. She taught school at Cropsey and was the fiancée of future President Ronald Reagan.